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ABSTRACT

A four-month participant-observation study of new teaching assistants examined what happens when "teaching stories" are taken from the margins and placed at the center of a teacher preparation program. New teaching assistants participated in a week-long presemester orientation, took a one-semester Theory and Practice seminar, and enrolled in a one-credit practicum. During the orientation, experienced teachers modeled and told stories about their own classroom practice. Teaching assistants kept weekly journals of their teaching experiences and met once a week with a faculty member to tell stories about what was happening in their classrooms. Results indicated that teaching assistants struggled with at least three problems: (1) some were skeptical about the validity and reliability of the local knowledge represented by stories; (2) some became cynical because they perceived that certain kinds of stories were being endorsed over others; and (3) some worried that they lacked control of the meanings and uses of their stories. Two reasons emerged as to why stress and ambivalence remained over the use of such stories even when they were authorized within a program: teaching assistants may have been confused about whether they were subjects or objects of their own stories, and about what counts as disciplinary knowledge. Findings suggest that authorizing stories in a teacher preparation program introduces difficult new issues of authority and credibility. (RS)

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A Usable Past: Functions of Stories among New TA's

Teaching assistants spend a good deal of time telling "teaching stories." Told unofficially, behind office doors or over several beers, these stories allow participants to complain, let off steam, subvert authority, judge others, enforce group standards, reinforce mutual connections, and transmit practical know-how. In short, they fulfill many of the functions of gossip; and like gossip, they are generally marginal, devalued as accretions of lore rather than bodies of disciplined knowledge.

What happens, then, when lore goes official? When teaching stories are taken from the margins and placed at the center of a teacher preparation program? What happens when writing program faculty urge TA's to take stories seriously, not only as a way to store and transmit knowledge, but also as a way to generate knowledge, reflect on experience, and even transform teaching practice? Once stories are authorized in this way, they should certainly gain credibility, and TA's should have no trouble bringing their own stories from the private realm into the public sphere . Actually, my research among new TA's suggests something different: authorizing stories in a teacher preparation program introduces difficult new issues of authority and credibility. TA's don't automatically embrace the story as a means to knowledge as soon as they get permission to do so; they don't always connect with "a usable past" that enlightens their teaching. Those who resist have decided that stories <u>don't</u> count enough as knowledge, and that they count <u>too much</u>. It depends on who's telling and who's knowing.

During a four-month participant-observation study of new TA's, I saw narratives used effectively in a university writing program that endorsed story as part of teacher preparation. New TA's participated in a week-long presemester orientation, took a one-semester Theory and Practice seminar, and enrolled in a one-credit practicum. During the

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orientation, experienced teachers modeled and told stories about their own classroom practice. As part of their seminar assignment, TA's kept weekly journals of their own teaching experiences. In the practicum, they met as a group twice a week with a faculty member to tell stories about what was happening in their classrooms--to discuss practices they had found successful and describe events that had raised questions for them. Story enabled many TA's to share, critique, validate, and transform their experience as practitioners Yet others struggled with at least three problems: 1) some TA's were skeptical about the validity and reliability of the local knowledge represented by stories; they also had difficulty seeing experience and practical know-how as true knowledge; 2) some became cynical because they perceived that certain kinds of stories were being endorsed over others; 3) some worried that they lacked control of the meanings and uses of their stories--in particular, they were concerned that storytelling in an institutional setting might become a tool of surveillance. (This was in contrast to storytelling as gossip, which could be their tool of resistance.) I began to pay attention to these problems because I was seeing what I considered contradictory behavior: for example, TA's eagerly told and discussed stories, then immediately trivialized that activity with the labels "group therapy" or "gossip." But before we decide too quickly that the storytelling caused the trouble, we should re-examine our own attitudes, as academics, toward story, practice, experience, and what counts as knowledge. We have to recognize the risks and costs of storytelling in an academic setting.

To begin this re-examination, I'd like to look in more detail at the difficulties I've just mentioned. First--the skepticism about the usefulness of the particular, the doubts that the local knowledge created and passed on through anecdote should count as knowledge at all. Having entered graduate school with some hope of mastering an orderly system of general knowledge, some TA's now struggled with a different conception--knowledge that appeared limited, unsystematic, incoherent. No one was

providing a quick overview of the teaching field. It looked as if an unruly mass of stories was to take the place of a clear list of do's and don't's.

Michael was a new TA who enjoyed telling stories of his adventures in and out of the classroom--but he never came to see story as a respectable source of knowledge about teaching. Michael regarded stories as gossip and entertainment, and as a way to get attention. But when he wished to understand what was required to be a successful teacher, he wanted to abandon the stories and get down to business. So he hated the practicum. He told me, "We've got a class--it's TA group therapy. . . you know . . . everybody's saying, 'Oh, I've got little Jimmy, and he's so funny' . . . I don't care about everybody's cute little story! . . . We're getting all the exceptions, and not the rules down. Everybody does something different. I want to see the forest, not just the trees." To Michael, each story seemed useful only for the few TA's who were concerned with a specific issue. He wanted explanations by authorities, not the explorations of his peers. He could not locate any basic principles--or, as he put it, any "core of knowledge." At first, he also wished for a map. Later, after reading theoretical articles, he decided there wasn't supposed to be a map, but still insisted that "telling stores" was an ephemeral, egotistical activity, inferior to what he called "talking about ideas."

Like Michael, Jane perceived that storytelling lacked academic status, in spite of its official place in the writing program. It bothered her when faculty and graduate students from outside the program suggested that the practicum was not "rigorous" enough to deserve academic credit. It bothered her when they argued that storytelling was only a confidence-builder, not a source of knowledge that counted academically. Teaching-stories dealt with practice, rather than in propositions; such stories had more to do with knowing-how than with knowing-that; they featured the subjective, not the objective. Influenced by these dichotomies that degraded lore, Jane began to call herself a "theory person," meaning that she relied on abstract principles. Yet she still found the exchange of stories to be useful for her practice in a way that general principles were not.

So she also referred to herself as a practitioner (and "not a theory person," as if she had to make this choice, and make it clear). At the end of the term, Jane was confused. She said about the practicum, "It was only a social hour. It was helpful. Well--I'm fuzzy about it." For her and for others, two views of knowledge had clashed without leading to any synthesis.

The second difficulty I mentioned arose from TA's' perception that only certain kinds of stories were being implicitly authorized. Some TA's tried to reproduce these story forms; some were pleased that new forms helped them view their teaching in new ways; others resisted what they saw as a subtle indoctrination technique. Jane was in this last group. Although she was confused about the status of stories told by her peers, she resisted stories told by experts--especially those who appeared to be endorsed by the program. These included the experienced teachers who spoke at orientation, and the writing workshop proponents whose books appeared on the seminar reading list. Jane labeled their stories "testimonies," and she believed they were meant to seduce her to buy into a practice without first analyzing it. Jane was not moved by stories as teaching devices--particularly since they often took the form of the conversion narrative: "I used to think . . . but now I know . . . " Because of her fundamentalist religious background, Jane already knew about testimony as a persuasive device, she considered it anti-intellectual. The presence of this form in an academic setting made her think of orthodoxy and party lines. She and her circle joked about having to come up with a conversion story before the end of the semester. This cynicism came as a surprise to the program faculty, who had not intended to coerce cloned stories out of anyone, but who did believe that learning often followed a pattern of dissonance and transformation--something like a conversion narrative.

Jane and other TA's became cynical because they had assumed that storytelling meant complete autonomy--and then felt themselves in a double-bind when they encountered the limitations of story form and practitioner community. Stephen North has

said about practitioner lore, "Whereas in other communities the greatest authority over what constitutes knowledge resides with the community . . . with public knowledge, here it lies with the individual practitioner, and private knowledge . . . The individual finally decides . . . what counts as knowledge" (28). To the extent that TA's and faculty believed in a completely open field for individual knowledge-making, they were in for some problems: TA's who expected their mentors to be without agendas were soon disillusioned. Faculty who tried to stay out of the way, so that TA's could tell their own stories and make their own discoveries, were startled to hear comments about "party lines" and "in-groups." The community was indeed exerting authority over what constituted knowledge--although each TA retained the power to critique it.

The third problem had to do with new teachers' worries over the ramifications of stories they told about themselves in an institutional setting. TA's were accustomed to thinking of stories as private and personal. When they told stories in class, they felt exposed and vulnerable--like objects of surveillance. Certainly, they expected to be monitored in their first semester of teaching. But now some of them felt like collaborators in an observation process they did not quite understand. Story introduced a new kind of accountability without providing dependable techniques for distance and control. This anxiety was greatest for TA's whose experience had been in academic writing rather than fiction writing.

Bruce, for example, worried that he lacked control of the stories he was telling. As a new teacher, he tried constantly to monitor his public persona; in the presence of those who might evaluate him, he preferred to critique ideas rather than relate his own experiences. Whether his stories were positive or negative, their implicitness bothered him: he knew he could not control their interpretation. Particularly when he wrote teaching stories in his journal, he said, "It feels like there's constantly that evaluation." A story about his classroom practice might inadvertently reveal something he had been unaware of. Of course this would be useful for self-critique, but why should he make

himself so vulnerable to authorities who had the power to renew his teaching assistantship?

Sara, on the other hand, lacked control of the stories she was hearing. If her stories were officially so important, she reasoned, then her students' stories were vital too. As a result, she was soon engulfed in particulars. In a few months she collected a mountain of stories: classroom lore from every experienced teacher she could find and "trauma stories" [her phrase] from her students--stories about rape, abuse, money troubles, addiction, failure. She felt obliged to respond to everyone's stories. The result was stress. "I get so worked up I have to talk myself down from it," she told me. "All I do is talk about my students. . . they're emotional vampires." She had no distance, and she suspected that "distancing" was probably immoral anyway. Sara faced a world of stories with no protection.

Not surprisingly, fiction writers were least threatened by the use of story in their teaching preparation. They knew how to use stories to achieve distance and control, as academic writers often did not. One TA, Alan, often spoke about using fiction as a "back door to truth": "Whatever truth I think I have to offer, or whatever I want to explore," he said, "it's always natural for me to try to explore that through fiction." He used anecdotes as examples of what he wanted to avoid in teaching, as evidence of classroom success, and as analogies for certain teaching practices. "In writing a story," he said, "you have an idea of what you're going to do with it . . . where you're going to go with it. But often the process itself dictates where that's going to go, what's going to happen. I think it's the same with classes and teaching." Alan did not share any true confessions or tell about any unsolved problems: his expertise in storytelling allowed him to maintain a private-public boundary as he wanted it.

So, if stories are a source of important knowledge, and when their authorization within a program should make this both clear and official, why do so much stress and ambivalence remain? One reason may be that TA's are confused about whether they are

subjects or objects of their own stories. That is, by telling and listening to stories, are they doing something or having something done to them? Are they constructing themselves as knowers and transforming themselves as learners? Or are they letting themselves be molded, allowing themselves to be known? Can authorized teaching stories resist and transform cultural patterns, or only reproduce them? Story as part of teacher preparation makes a welcome connection between private and public spheres of experience; but in so doing it removes the protection of privacy. These are some reasons it is necessary for a seminar or practicum to discuss not only the interpretations of teaching stories, but also the implications of telling these stories.

A second reason for TA's' stress over this matter of storytelling has to do with our own confusion, in composition, over what counts as disciplinary knowledge. These questions don't have to be settled, but they should be explicitly discussed with TA's--and recent articles by Thomas Newkirk, Patricia Harkin, Linda Brodkey, and others can be helpful. As Brodkey puts it, "the academy has traditionally demonstrated a limited tolerance for lived experience, which it easily dismisses as 'anecdotes' or 'stories'" (41). Not only researchers, but also new TA's and experienced teachers must (in Newkirk's words) "face the traditional academic bias against the particular" (129). Students need to know that, like the case study in research, the teaching narrative "gains generalizability through particularity--if it provides insight" and enough specific information to allow teachers to judge whether it does provide insight. It is not unreasonable or unrigorous for TA's to view their stories as research--and not only as gossip, group therapy, or testimonial, however valuable these other functions may be. As Newkirk says, "In telling their tale, teachers need to recognize that the source of their authority comes from their intimate knowledge of the classroom and students . . . It does not come through deference to expert opinion or through suppressing intuitive resources in favor of more distanced and more academically respectable means of observation" (133). Vrinda Dalmiya and Linda Alcoff, who explore the epistemological status of practical and

experiential knowledge, also suggest that more than a sense of well-being can emerge from storytelling sessions: "The conversation between people who have shared a type of experience has a richer quality to it that may not be observable by a simple recounting of their statements. . . . [T]here is content to an 'empathic' conversation, which is what makes it richer (informationally) than a mere objective discourse" (240).

But, even though we may be convinced of the authority of practitioners and the importance of teaching stories as sources of valid knowledge, we still have to deal with the matter of expertise among new TA's. Ironically, the same focus on story that many see as not demanding academically can appear too demanding in terms of practical expertise. Most new TA's are used to being students, not teachers; they may find it easier to continue pursuing knowledge-that rather than tell stories which reveal their lack of knowledge-how. New teachers do not have much lore--if we define lore as practitioner knowledge of teaching. But they have plenty of experience. A story that turns out to be useful for teaching practice may have little obvious connection with teaching or the classroom (like Alan's story about his father who constantly issued orders, thus inadvertently showing his son one way not to teach). An emphasis on this kind of story in teacher preparation validates TA's' experiences as sources of knowledge that will help them transform their inexperience. Still, we should not expect that TA's, through a naturally unfolding process, will arrive at a position more or less matching a particular program's philosophy: that is, that their own teaching stories will cause them to perceive some truths about writing and teaching that their mentors had known all along. Often these truths do not appear self-evident, and no sooner have TA's responded to an invitation to validate experience as a source of new knowledge, than they feel that knowledge being undercut. Rather than waiting, patiently or impatiently, for new teachers to "come around," mentors, too, have to come to terms with a multiplicity of knowledges. Harkin suggests a postmodern way to view knowledges by superimposing them, and concentrating on selected intersections. Lore needn't be a rattletrap unattended

house or a busy one-way street; Harkin suggests the AAA trip-tik or simulcast interviews as alternative analogies. I believe that these ways of viewing story would challenge TA's who are concerned about starting out in teaching with a map of worthwhile knowledge and those who have difficulty trusting the map they are beginning to draw for themselves.

Yes, the problems encountered by the TA's I studied may indicate inadequacies of lore as knowledge that counts. But it is more likely that there are inadequacies in our attitude toward lore and toward the stories that constitute much of it. We fail to authorize teaching stories or fail to treat them adequately when we do authorize them. In addition to endorsing and modeling the teaching story, TA's and their mentors must discuss explicitly how it participates in what we call knowledge. Lore might also be redefined to include not only stories of what worked and didn't work in the classroom, but also critical discussions of why something worked, why it makes a difference, who benefits . This is a most demanding approach to knowledge that counts--it is not only assented to as truth, but it is put to use--as teaching that counts .

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